

Chapter 3-6

It's All About the Framing: How Mentorship Shaped My Perspective as an Early Career Teacher

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So, tell me about a time you failed.
Can it be personal?
Sure.
I failed to lose weight.
And what did you do?
I tried again and again.
Why do you consider it failure?
Because I haven't been able to reach my goal.
But you still try?
Yes.
Well, I see this as persistence, not failure.

Mona, personal communication, 1995

I had just graduated college with a degree in English, and during the interview for my first full-time job as a fifth-grade teacher, I learned a couple of lessons that I carried with me through my professional and personal life: First, I will only fail when I stop trying. Second, sometimes success and failure are a matter of perspective. During the interview, Mona, at the time a CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) trainer and consultant for the school I had applied to, helped me understand the importance of framing. At the time, she and her business partner, Aleya, were retained by the school to provide teacher training and supervise the English department faculty. Mrs. Aleya and Mrs. Mona, as my colleagues and I used to call them, continued to be part of

my personal and professional life, first as mentors and then as friends for over 15 years after that first interview. They are why I remained an educator for almost three decades, and I continue to use the techniques they showed me all those years ago. As I reflect on why my relationship with them had such an impact, I realize a few key factors: they allowed me the space to learn, make mistakes, and grow, they were a resource and always available, and we had shared trust.

We all know that the first years are crucial in forming our professional identity as teachers. After graduating college, we navigate a new career, experiment with pedagogy, and struggle to understand our new work environment (Eick, 2002; Flores, 2001). Not only did Mona and Aleya train me and my colleagues in lesson planning, classroom management, and correction techniques, but they also helped me explore my identity as a teacher and allowed me to better understand my strengths and areas of growth through classroom visits, questions, dialogue, constructive feedback, and constant encouragement to reflect, adapt, and then adopt new practices; I was able to find my space.

So, how were they a resource, and what did I learn from them? As a new teacher, my biggest challenges were classroom management and linking student engagement to outcomes. With minimal work experience and basic pedagogy, I designed lesson plans with activities I thought were interesting for the students. When the students failed to show the outcome I had intended, I felt that the lesson had failed; however, Mona and Aleya used reflective techniques and self-assessment questions that allowed me to focus on how to link the input to outcomes. This reflective process was new to me since I did not have formal teacher training before accepting the position. During one of the visits, while teaching *Around the World in Eighty Days*, I divided the class and gave each group a map to follow the route. The activity was successful; the students engaged with the material and had fun. I had not thought about anything other than it being interesting. However, in my follow-up conversation with Aleya, she asked what else the activity added to the lesson—How did it help the students better understand the text or engage with it on a deeper level? The questions were meant to engage me in reflective practices without criticizing my approach or crushing my spirit. It was one of those “aha” moments as a 22-year-old teacher. Mona and Aleya were the textbook definitions of mentors, according to Barrera and colleagues (2010). They were there not only to provide the support that would help me settle into the school, but they also provided structural support for me as a young professional to reflect on my classroom and teaching style and help me systematically develop an understanding of what works and what does not and determine why.

The first few years in one’s career are critical in determining whether we, as new teachers, will remain or leave that position or the teaching profession. This contemplation was true for me. During my junior year in college, I was offered the opportunity to teach seventh-grade English. At the time, I had a great rapport with the students but no formal training or mentorship. A couple of my colleagues took me under their wings and supported me as I learned my way as a new teacher. Because of this experience, I decided to continue in the classroom.

Many of us choose education because we want to make a meaningful impact on the lives of our students (Taylor et al., 2014). This calling was especially true; I wanted to support my community and positively influence future generations. However, recent research reveals a growing challenge—fewer teachers enter and remain in the profession. Teacher retention has become a critical issue, particularly during the early years of one’s career when many educators feel unsupported and unprepared to face the demands of the classroom. According to Redding and Henry (2019), only 38% of teachers remain in their positions after their third year. However, adequate support, observations, feedback, and positive professional development ethos result in new teacher retention. With appropriate mentorships and support, new teachers can shift from student teachers to career professionals (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

After that first year under Mona and Aleya’s mentorship, I developed a stronger sense of self-confidence with a deep desire for learning and experimenting. I also committed to being an educator and started volunteering in teacher training programs Mona and Aleya ran that helped other teachers better understand their abilities and potential. Without proper mentorship and guidance, talented educators can become discouraged, feeling overwhelmed by the profession’s demands.

New teachers must be allowed to experiment and explore innovative pedagogical approaches (Qadach et al., 2020). This exploration allowed me to grow and continue my career in education. This growth cannot happen without deep trust between new teachers, administration, and mentors, strong professional communication, and a safe work environment. My experience with Mona and Aleya shows the immense value of early mentorship. Their support helped me develop critical classroom management skills and reflective practices and transformed how I viewed teaching as a profession. They created a nurturing environment where experimentation was encouraged, learning from mistakes was seen as part of the growth process, and collaborating with colleagues was a sign of strength. This approach was crucial for my long-term commitment to teaching. New teachers can thrive through this structure—combining trust, feedback, and continuous professional development—ultimately ensuring their retention.

The mentorship I received extended beyond technical skills. Mona and Aleya were role models who embodied the qualities of effective leadership—compassion, communication, and collaboration. In addition, they, directly and indirectly, helped me to reframe challenges as opportunities; this ability to perceive obstacles differently allowed me to grow as a teacher and professor later on. As Tiplic (2015) points out, these characteristics play a vital role in teacher development and retention when paired with a supportive professional environment. By giving new teachers the space to explore, make mistakes, and grow, mentors can profoundly impact their mentees’ careers and the entire educational ecosystem.

Mentorship does not just transform individual teachers; it has the potential to address larger systemic issues, including teacher shortages and burnout. By investing in the mentorship of early-career educators, avoiding pointing shortcomings, and encouraging reframing, schools, and districts can cultivate a more resilient, innovative,

and dedicated workforce. Mona and Aleya did not just shape my career trajectory; they demonstrated how impactful mentorship could be in sustaining teachers in the field for the long term. As we look at the future of education, I believe that fostering these mentoring relationships is key to addressing the ongoing challenges in teacher retention and ensuring that teachers like me continue to find fulfillment and purpose in their work.

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